

# THE TALENT OF T S ELIOT

by George Williamson





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For Isobel and Alfred

JW

GEORGE WILLIAMSON 1898-1968

*The Talent of T. S. Eliot*, published in 1929, was the first book devoted to a study of the poetry and prose of T. S. Eliot and was also George Williamson's first book. Therefore, although it has been superseded by his *The Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot*, it seemed worth reprinting historically and sentimentally as a memento for friends and colleagues. I wish to thank Mr. Peter du Sautoy of Faber and Faber for his kind and friendly help.

JEHANNE WILLIAMSON

Chicago 1969.

## PREFATORY NOTE

I wish to acknowledge my obligation to the editor of *The Sewanee Review*, in which this essay appeared in a more primitive form.

The serious reader will find Mr. Eliot's recent Introduction to *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems* a most valuable commentary on these pages. Despite his foreign debt, Eliot reveals more and more as time passes his far greater debt to native tradition. The basis for this judgment is elucidated in my book, *The Donne Tradition*, soon to be published by the Harvard University Press.

G.W.

November 1929.

## I. ELIOT AND DONNE

One day while I was reading Eliot's 'Whispers of Immortality', and especially the line,

Donne, I suppose, was such another,

the thought struck me that Eliot himself is such another as Donne. Later, Mr. Richard Aldington remarked the kinship of Eliot with the Elizabethans and strengthened my feeling of his relation to Donne. At length, when I read Donne with Eliot's criticism and poetry in mind, this feeling crystallized into certain observations. And then I saw the justice of Dr. Johnson's remark that no man could be born a 'metaphysical poet' by ringing changes on convention and imitation. For the truth is that Mr. Eliot has been so original as to keep us from seeing that he is a true metaphysical poet of the line of John Donne. This explanation is my excuse for analyzing the talent with which Eliot has carried on the tradition of Donne.

Mr. Eliot's debt to the Donne tradition begins with his poetic theory, for the main points of that theory may be drawn from his analysis of Donne. This analysis is found in his review of John Donne and in his essay on the Metaphysical Poets, dealing largely with Donne. In the latter essay Eliot speaks of the necessity, in a various and complex civilization, of a various and complex poetry, and concludes, 'Hence we get something which looks very much like the conceit—we get, in fact, a



method curiously similar to that of the "metaphysical poets", similar also in its use of obscure words and of simple phrasing.<sup>1</sup>

This conclusion embraces the main items in the debt which Eliot owes to Donne. But this debt will have to be considered in the light of a statement found in Eliot's review of Donne: 'Our appreciation of Donne must be an appreciation of what we lack, as well as of what we have in common with him.'<sup>2</sup> What we moderns lack, Eliot has tried to supply in his poetry; what we have in common with Donne, Eliot also has; hence this mental kinship will have to be carefully defined.

According to Eliot, 'The age objects to the heroic and sublime, and it objects to the simplification and separation of the mental faculties.' These are the things we have in common with Donne, and awareness of this kinship prompts Eliot to find the answers Donne found, even if his age were unconscious of the questions. A concrete example of the objection to the heroic and sublime is found in the reappearance in Eliot of the mocking man-of-the-world philosophy of love, such as the 'Conversation Galante'—but this is also Laforgue. The objection to the simplification and separation of the mental faculties brings us to the first main, and perhaps most important, item in Eliot's debt to Donne. That is his idea of the poetic mind, its methods and materials. This idea comes straight out of his analysis of Donne and relates to what Professor Grierson calls 'the peculiar blend of passion and thought . . . which is their [the Metaphysical Poets'] greatest achievement'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See *Homage to John Dryden*, Hogarth Press, 1924.

<sup>2</sup>See *Nation and Athenaeum*, 9 June 1923, for this important review.

<sup>3</sup>See his fine Introduction to *Metaphysical Poetry: Donne to Butler*.



This idea may be called the unification of sensibility; it is the gist of Grierson's statement, and of Eliot's observation that 'a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling', is exactly what we find in Donne. Now, examination will show this unified sensibility to be the central tenet in the poetic theory expounded in Eliot's essays on Donne and the Metaphysical Poets, as well as in *The Sacred Wood*. And it is this idea that governs Eliot's poetic method and the range of material found in his poetry.

How profoundly the presence of this unified sensibility in Donne affected his poetry, and how surely the awareness of this secret of Donne has affected Eliot appears as soon as one examines the commonest criticism of the two poets. Both are charged with incorporating too much curious knowledge into their poetry. But this charge could not be made, were it not that for them, as Eliot says of Donne, 'thought is an intense feeling which is one with every other feeling'. Probably nothing has influenced Eliot more than his perception that 'the poets of the seventeenth century . . . possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience'.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Desmond MacCarthy, in his studies of the New Poets, voices the common feeling about Eliot when he refers to Eliot's out-of-the-way erudition and learned, oblique, and obscure allusions.<sup>2</sup> These words also find their place after Donne in every literary history. The practice which provokes these words was natural and unpremeditated in Donne; in Eliot it has been consciously

<sup>1</sup>For a fuller understanding of these quotations, the reader should turn to 'The Metaphysical Poets' and 'Andrew Marvell' in *Homage to John Dryden*.

<sup>2</sup>See his study of Eliot in *The New Statesman*, 8 June 1921.

developed, as anyone can see by reading the American edition of his *Poems* backwards—a method which will give their relative chronology.

How Donne could incorporate so much learning into his poetry Eliot further explains when he says of the Metaphysical Poets, and especially of Donne, that 'their mode of feeling was directly and freshly altered by their reading and thought'. This is the passionate thinking which Grierson finds in Donne; it is also the poetic theory which Eliot illustrates in *The Waste Land*, where he gives us the emotional equivalents of a large amount of reading and thinking. For instance, this passage:

I have heard the key  
Turn in the door once and turn once only  
We think of the key, each in his prison  
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison  
Only at nightfall, aetherial rumours  
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus.

Here we have allusions to Dante and Shakespeare—allusions that have the quality of experiences—and a substructure of idealism drawn from Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*. And yet this is the same 'direct sensuous apprehension of thought' that Eliot notes in Donne. How implicit the thought is in the feeling may be seen by comparing this passage with Arnold's 'Self-Dependence', where the thought is similar but smaller.

The amount of learning which Eliot incorporates into *The Waste Land* is evident upon reading the text or the notes he supplies. His success is not here the question, though it seems to me complete. And how much this method owes to Donne is not less evident in his statement of the needs of modern poetry at the end of his essay on the Metaphysical Poets. There he insists that

the modern poet should know more, an insistence obviously inspired by the text of Donne and his school. Compare this insistence with a similar one in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', which appears in *The Sacred Wood*.

Donne's learning is so well known that I need only point out the similarity of Eliot's knowledge. Eliot also draws upon medicine, law, physics, philosophy, and in his own time upon anthropology. These resemblances in learning are pointed out not as a direct debt, but as the materials which a unified sensibility is able to transmute into poetry. And Eliot, in his essay on Marvell, regards Donne as almost the inventor of a system of feeling that is able 'to gather up and to digest into its art all the experience of the human mind'. The result of his perception of this system in Donne is seen in the criticism that 'Eliot's subject is always the ingredients of the human mind'. This unified sensibility is perhaps the chief item in the 'method curiously similar to that of the metaphysical poets' which Eliot sees growing out of the needs of modern poetry.

As a guide for further analysis, let me quote Professor Grierson's summary of Donne's technique: 'his phrasing and conceits, the metaphysics of mediaeval Christianity, his packed verse with its bold, irregular fingering and echoing vowel sounds'.<sup>1</sup> This summary comes very close to Eliot's outline of modern technique, which I have quoted. I shall consider the erudite as explained in the matter already discussed; there remain the first and third parallels.

Let us consider what, if anything, Eliot owes to

<sup>1</sup>From his valuable Introduction to *Metaphysical Poetry*.



Donne's 'phrasing and conceits'. The colloquial character of Donne's phrasing and diction receives the common support of Gosse, Grierson, and Eliot. Gosse says that Donne 'arrived at an excess of actuality in style';<sup>1</sup> Grierson sees in Donne's verse and diction the same blend of 'the colloquial and the bizarre'; Eliot speaks of the 'use of obscure words and simple phrasing'. *Colloquial* and *bizarre* seem just epithets for both the vocabulary and phrasing of Donne, and Eliot is surely characterized by the same epithets. Anyone can see in Eliot the vocabulary of what Mr. MacCarthy calls 'erudite allusions and crisp colloquialisms'. These lines from the first section of *The Waste Land* will illustrate:

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,  
Had a bad cold, nevertheless  
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,  
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,  
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,  
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)

Notice the snuffle which *nevertheless* gives Madame Sosostris.<sup>2</sup>

What Eliot owes to Donne in phrasing will come out more clearly if we examine the conceit. Eliot's words, 'something which looks very much like the conceit', apply strikingly to his own poetry. Both the expanded and the condensed conceit, or far-fetched figure of speech, are found in his poems. The expanded conceit appears in these lines from 'Prufrock':

<sup>1</sup>See his essay in *Jacobean Poets*.

<sup>2</sup>See the interesting *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry* by Mr. Robert Graves, p. 30.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,  
And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

If this comparison of the fog to a cat is not of the true tribe of 'compasses', at least it is something that looks very much like the conceit, and is expanded in the same manner.

The condensed conceit is more common in Eliot. Here are a few examples:

- (a) When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherized upon a table.—*Prufrack*.
- (b) We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole  
Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips.  
—*Portrait of a Lady*.
- (c) But our lot crawls between dry ribs  
To keep our metaphysics warm.  
—*Whispers of Immortality*.
- (d) We two shall lie together, lapt  
In a five per cent Exchequer Bond.—*A Cooking Egg*.

These are enough to show the frequency of the conceit in Eliot's poetry. Far-fetched these figures are, but bad only if they fail to come off. That is Eliot's view of the metaphysical conceit, a view in which he opposes Dr. Johnson and reasserts Donne's place in the English tradition.

Mr. Eliot also has his simple startling phrases and arresting contrasts of association, things he has made

admiring analyses of in Donne. One may not meet 'a bracelet of bright hair about the bone' in Eliot, but one does meet such phrases as

- (a) Allayed the fever of the bone,
- (b) Gives promise of pneumatic bliss,
- (c) The silent vertebrate in brown.

One also finds the imaginative surprise which 'makes one little room an every where'. Eliot's essay on Marvell shows how much he regards this surprise as a virtue in the Metaphysicals and an essential in all poetry. Here is an example in 'Sweeney among the Nightingales':

Gloomy Orion and the Dog  
Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas;  
The person in the Spanish cape  
Tries to sit on Sweeney's knees,

or this in a different vein from *The Waste Land*:

They wash their feet in soda water  
*Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!*

Out of their context these lines do not show the sombre under-current of feeling that is in them, which makes their surprise serious and not frivolous.

By now the colloquial and bizarre diction, the obscure words and simple phrasing, will be evident in Eliot; and, together with the conceits, will show him in debt to the Donne tradition.

What Eliot owes to Donne's 'packed verse with its bold, irregular fingering and echoing vowel sounds' will be less easy to show. But here again I can start with the



opinion of Gosse and Grierson that Donne kept the five-foot verse, or iambic pentameter, as a norm around which he wove his variations. In his 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*' Eliot reveals an intimate understanding of the metrical problem we find in Donne when he says, 'At the beginning of the seventeenth century . . . one finds the same constant evasion and recognition of regularity.'<sup>1</sup> His study of seventeenth-century prosody leads him to this formulation: 'The ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the "freest" verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse.' This is certainly the rule in Eliot's verse, and a rule that applies to Donne and Webster—another important influence in Eliot—and is applied to Donne by Gosse and Grierson.

Professor Grierson speaks of Donne's 'packed verse', and Mr. MacCarthy notices the 'exciting concision' of Eliot's phrasing. But let us see how 'bold, irregular fingering' applies to Eliot's verse. Although the passages already quoted from Eliot will show the 'constant evasion and recognition of regularity' which govern Donne's verse, let me add this passage from 'Gerontion':

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,  
Guides us by vanities. Think now  
She gives when our attention is distracted,  
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions  
That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late  
What's not believed in, or if still believed  
In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon  
Into weak hands what's thought can be dispensed with  
Till the refusal propagates a fear.

<sup>1</sup>This essay may be found in *The New Statesman* for 3 March 1917.

Surely here is irregular fingering on an iambic pentameter norm! This is text enough for the analysis I have been making, and for some I have still to make.

The trick of repeating a word with shifted accent which Mr. Fletcher Melton<sup>1</sup> finds in Donne and thinks the whole mystery of his art may also be found in Eliot. Here are illustrations of this trick of irregular fingering:

- (a) And would it have been worth it, after all,  
Would it have been worth while,—*Prufrock*.
- (b) And four wax candles in the darkened room  
Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,—*Portrait*.
- (c) Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.  
—*La Figlia che Piange*.
- (d) The eyes are not here  
There are no eyes here  
In this valley of dying stars  
In this hollow valley.—*The Hollow Men*.
- (e) —And God said  
Prophecy to the wind, to the wind only for only  
The wind will listen.—*Salutation*.

Echoing vowel sounds, another device of Donne's, Eliot also uses with great effect. The passage quoted from 'Gerontion' makes some use of this device. Better and fuller use is found in the following passages.

For I have known them all already, known them all,  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
Beneath the music from a farther room.  
So how should I presume?—*Prufrock*.

<sup>1</sup>Cited by Professor Grierson in his Introduction to *Metaphysical Poetry*.

Here are open *a*'s, *i*'s, and *o*'s against a bass-vowel accompaniment of rhymes in long *oo*, producing music that underscores the lassitude and timid scepticism of the whole passage.

This music is successful with a 'dying fall'

Now that we talk of dying—

And should I have the right to smile?—*Portrait of a Lady*.

This music is chiefly a matter of open and closed *i*'s and their contrast, especially successful because of the retarded movement which those last open *i*'s bring. Thus the dying fall becomes part of the vowel music itself.

So in these elements of poetical rhetoric, which are part of Donne's technique, we find Eliot adept and unhindered in his expression of a Donne-like density of thought. The study of Donne provoked Eliot to assert that 'a style, a rhythm, to be significant, must embody a significant mind'—a thought which must have come to Donne as he looked at the easy Spenserianism of his day. Both Donne and Eliot have written in the faith of this assertion.

The last angle from which I should like to regard the debt of Eliot to Donne is that of the attitude of the two poets. The danger in this phase of the question lies in the possible confusion between apparent indebtedness and real kinship of mind. Undoubtedly there is kinship of mind between Eliot and Donne, but this kinship has served to make Eliot more conscious that the virtue of the Metaphysical Poets was, in his own words, 'something permanently valuable, which subsequently disappeared, but ought not to have disappeared'. This virtue he attempts to recover in his literary analysis and in his poetic practice.



As one of the peculiarities of this virtue, Eliot quotes Dr. Johnson's dictum that 'their attempts were always analytic'; but Eliot insists 'that, after the dissociation, they put the material together again in a new unity'. Again in his essay on Marvell, Eliot is chiefly concerned with defining wit as a metaphysical secret: 'a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace' and 'an alliance of levity and seriousness (by which the seriousness is intensified)'. Although Eliot is dissatisfied with his definition of this metaphysical quality, he is keenly aware that 'it is something precious and needed and apparently extinct'.

A third quality must be associated with the attitude I am trying to define; it is a more individual element in Donne—the mood of the charnel-house. In the Marvell essay Eliot specifically designates this as 'the mood of Donne'. And in this connection we should remember that Eliot regards a poet like Donne as almost 'the inventor of an attitude, a system of feeling or of morals'. However permanently valuable this mood of the charnel-house may be, it is at least a constant element in the attitude of Donne and, as no reader of *The Waste Land* and *Poems* can doubt, of Eliot. Even the more recent poems of Eliot reveal the mood of 'death's dream kingdom', for 'The Hollow Men' and 'A Song for Simeon' remind us how Donne deepened love and religion with the thought of death. This resemblance is doubtless one of mental kinship, but we can hardly doubt that the mood has been deepened, perhaps partially created, in Eliot by his profound admiration for Donne. So deep is that impression as to receive explicit statement in his poetry:

Donne, I suppose, was such another  
Who found no substitute for sense;

To seize and clutch and penetrate,  
Expert beyond experience,

He knew the anguish of the marrow  
The ague of the skeleton;  
No contact possible to flesh  
Allayed the fever of the bone.

—*Whispers of Immortality.*

How the mood and temper of Donne have colored Eliot's mind appears in the very body of this verse.

The more general qualities of analysis and wit have become ruling precepts in Eliot's verse, because they are permanently valuable things in metaphysical poetry. For the analysis turn back to the passage from 'Gerontion', which analyzes the efficacy of wisdom into disillusion of various sorts, or to the fine analysis of Donne just quoted. We do not need the word of Mr. Desmond MacCarthy to convince us of the ruling presence of analysis in Eliot. But the reading of either 'Gerontion' or 'Whispers of Immortality' will show that Eliot puts his material together again in the new unity of a mood or an emotion.

As to the wit in Eliot, I think none of his critics would disagree with these words: 'wit is everywhere. It is his very genius, and fashions his feeling and his thought.' But these words are written about Donne by M. Legouis in his *History of English Literature: 650-1660*, and are only a few of many that have a strange application to Eliot. Anyone who doubts the great store which Eliot sets by the wit of the Metaphysicals should read his essay on Marvell; or *The Waste Land*, in which seriousness is intensified by levity; or 'La Figlia che Piange', which has a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace. And certainly wit is the mental facet which carries the light in

‘Prufrock’ and the ‘Portrait of a Lady’. To illustrate Eliot as a master of the witty phrase, let me quote:

(a) My smile falls heavily among the bric-a-brac.—*Portrait*.

(b) And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
—*Prufrock*.

(c) But every week we hear rejoice  
The Church, at being one with God.  
—*The Hippopotamus*.

(d) One of the low on whom assurance sits  
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.—*Waste Land*.

To sum up the method curiously similar to that of the Metaphysical Poets which Eliot describes as the modern technique, and which I hope I have shown in his poetry, let me add to the unified sensibility, colloquial and bizarre vocabulary and verse, conceit and poetical rhetoric, these last qualities of analysis and wit. This metaphysical method puts Eliot in debt to Donne; but Eliot repays this debt by being, like Donne, a curious explorer of the soul, and by giving to his exploration that curious leaping imagination which can

Go and catch a falling star,  
Get with child a mandrake root.

So superbly is this method adapted to this kind of imagination that any mental kinship would almost surely draw Eliot to the technique of Donne.

Such seems to me the literary filiation of Eliot. Mr. Richard Aldington, who has given us the best literary portrait of Eliot, puts it thus: ‘Mr. Eliot’s poetry is traditional, linking up on the one hand with the ironic French poets and, on the other, with the stately, subtle-minded Englishmen of the Renaissance.’<sup>1</sup> And to complete the

<sup>1</sup>See his *Literary Studies and Reviews*.



circle, Eliot says that these same ironic French poets 'are nearer to the "school of Donne" than any modern English poet'. Except himself, I would add.

Mr. Eliot stands to his age as Donne to his, in opposition to the merely pretty and conventional, to the facile and copious, and to the shallow and affectedly simple. He abhors the commonplace and delights in the subtle; and, like Donne, he has felt that curiosity of the soul which yearns to know. When Grierson speaks of 'the fullest record in our literature of the disintegrating collision in a sensitive mind of the old tradition and the new learning', one scarcely knows which he is describing better, *The Second Anniversary* in the seventeenth century, or *The Waste Land* in the twentieth. Both the old poet and the new poet are supremely aware of the soul of his age, in which

The new philosophy calls all in doubt,

and in that soul each hears, and echoes in his verse, the song which we hear after him

And think those broken and soft notes to be  
Division, and thy happiest harmony.—*Second Anniversary*.

## II. THE SACRED WOOD IN THE WASTE LAND

On the relation of Eliot's prose to his verse, I have long wanted to set forth a view which is not shared by most of his critics. In particular, Mr. Ernest Boyd, in his *Studies from Ten Literatures*, not only makes Eliot out to be something of a literary Charlie Chaplin, but boldly declares that 'his aesthetic theory bears no relation whatever to his practice'.

This verdict is so at odds with what seems to me the plain reading of Eliot's work that I feel compelled to insist upon the unity of his literary achievement and, if possible, to explain my insistence. One has only to put Eliot's aesthetic theory beside his practice to see their close relation, and this is precisely what I wish to do.

Mr. Eliot's aesthetic theory is found in *The Sacred Wood* and is most definitely stated in the essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. This essay furnishes the principles which guide his poetic practice and which bring his power of analysis to bear on the subjects of *The Sacred Wood*. These principles are based on his Impersonal theory of poetry, which insists on two things: 'the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors', and the impersonal relation of the poem to its author. This relation is impersonal because the mind digests and transmutes its material into the impersonal emotion of art. The individual talent appears in the mode of perceiving, registering, and digesting impressions. Briefly, Eliot's

theory involves three factors: tradition, depersonalization, and novelty.

In ruling out personality, in its common sense, Eliot believes that 'the poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together'. This conception of the poetic mind illuminates Eliot's insistence upon the sense of tradition and the process of depersonalization, and admirably describes the genesis of *The Waste Land*. So considered, the poetic mind is a finely perfected medium which manifests its peculiar way of seeing things in a peculiar way of saying things. For language this means that every vital development in expression comes from a development in sensibility. Therefore, when Eliot writes in a London Letter to *The Dial*, 'What is needed of art is a simplification of current life into something rich and strange', he is asking for a kind of vision that his theory of poetry is peculiarly fitted to give: a vision rich with the sense of tradition, strange with the novelty of an individual mode of seeing things.

How these principles are applied in *The Sacred Wood* will become evident to anyone who will take the trouble to read the book. How they apply to Eliot's poetry is perhaps less obvious, or else Mr. Boyd would not have remarked that Eliot's 'aesthetic theory bears no relation whatever to his practice'. So close is the relation, however, as to suggest that the theory is merely the natural outgrowth of the practice.

Since Mr. Boyd has singled out *The Waste Land*, and since it is the most admirable example of Eliot's theory carried out in practice, I may as well use it to explain my view. The traditional character of Eliot's poetry, which

Mr. Aldington has shown in his *Literary Studies and Reviews*, is strongly marked in *The Waste Land*; so much so that Eliot has been said to echo, even to imitate, the Elizabethans. His notes to *The Waste Land* acknowledge the strong sense of the past that is in it; the poetry itself shows how thoroughly Eliot has made this past his own. In reading it one is forced continually to consider 'the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors'.

The notes to *The Waste Land* also illustrate the practical working of the poetic mind as Eliot conceives it; in them we find many of the feelings, phrases, and images which his mind stored up for the new compound that was to be this poem. Many of the elements of the new compound are from the Elizabethans, Dante, Baudelaire, and studies in anthropology. In fact, Eliot has almost charted the genesis of his poem in accordance with his conception of the poetic mind.

The startling novelty, in the common view, of *The Waste Land* is perhaps evidence enough of the individuality of Eliot's talent, but certain aspects of that novelty need to be recalled. Quotations from various languages are left in the original; effects of jazz are introduced in such phrasing as 'HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME' and 'OOOO that Shakespeherian Rag'; and parodies of well-known poetry are made to give ironic overtones. The metrical form varies from Elizabethan blank verse to free verse and jazz rhymes such as 'elegant—intelligent'. For inspiration and symbolism the poem draws heavily upon anthropology, while its matter and mood reflect the complexity and diversity which characterize the modern mind. That the poem is impersonal and stated as something perceived I think none will deny. With such novelty of a positive sort, the poem has novelty of a negative sort,



which some would call its most striking quality. This is a seeming lack of coherence and structure, but this must be referred to Eliot's idea of the poet's aim.

'The poet's aim', Eliot remarks in his essay on Dante in *The Sacred Wood*, 'is to state a vision.' Dante comes in most pertinently here, for besides contributing to the matter of *The Waste Land*, he stimulated Eliot to a formulation of the poetic aim which he has embodied in this poem. Concerning this aim, the essay on Dante has two other suggestions which we shall need: the first is that Dante gives an 'ordered presentation of emotions'; the second, that his allegory is the necessary scaffold for the emotional structure, which alone must be understood. Here are keys to *The Waste Land*.

In this poem Eliot has given us an 'ordered presentation of emotions', with the necessary scaffold supplied by anthropology. What we need to understand is the emotional structure of *The Waste Land*, not the anthropology. Of course the theme is the waste land of the modern spirit, which is presented in its typical emotional aspects. The chaos, disillusion, apathy, and groping of the modern mind, exasperated by its revised attitude to nature, its 'heap of broken images', and its great thirst for new water of the spirit, are presented in the things Tiresias sees, which make up the poem. From the opening theme of 'I had not thought death had undone so many' to the closing one of 'We who were living are now dying', this is a tremendously poignant song of the death of the spirit. A very sure instinct has guided Eliot to the most profoundly significant subject for poetry in our day: the destructive effect of anthropological science upon the modern spirit and imagination. In fact, this poem expresses the Grail search of the modern mind through a

waste land which can show us only 'fear in a handful of dust' and reasons for the question '*Wo weilest du?*'

It is this emotional structure that gives such reverberating echoes to the question 'Shall I at least set my lands in order?' and to the statement 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins' when we read them at the end of the poem. And to cap it all, there is the suggestion of the Hamlet state of mind, borrowing 'Hieronymo's mad againe' from *The Spanish Tragedy*, and calling up a world in which 'chaos is come again'. This emotional structure is not complete, however, without the Buddhist 'Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.' In these words Eliot seems to suggest the way out of this waste land, for he has written a passage symbolizing each, and has concluded by repeating them and giving the Buddhist 'Peace which passeth understanding'. These same three words—which mean *give, sympathize, control*—are 'what the thunder said'; they contain the emotional resolution of the poem.

Thus the emotional structure is completed and the vision of the poet stated. If Eliot's vision is less ordered than Dante's, it is largely because Eliot's scaffolding is anthropology and his world chaotic. His 'simplification of current life into something rich and strange' reflects the variety and complexity of our civilization, and the disorder which knowledge has brought is one of the chief signs of that complexity. In making this simplification he has had to dispense with transitions, because his subject, the modern mind with its stony rubbish of broken images, has no ordered philosophy and little religion to make transition easy and coherent. Moreover, this vision is stated in a little over four hundred lines, and yet it presents the characteristic emotions of our age with poignant cogency. 'The structure of emotions', to quote Eliot on

Dante, ' . . . is complete from the most sensuous to the most intellectual and the most spiritual.' Certainly, the echoes of Dante and Baudelaire are not accidents in *The Waste Land*, which places Eliot in the ranks of those who have created visions of their age. He too is a 'master of the disgusting', but endowed with the fastidious reserve of irony.

I hope that by this time I have made clear the very close relation between Eliot's aesthetic theory and his practice in *The Waste Land*. Equally clear a case can be made for his other poetry; in fact, Mr. Aldington has outlined it, at least in part, in his valuable essay on Eliot.

Before I conclude I ought to add a few remarks on the language of *The Waste Land*. I suspect that Eliot owes a considerable debt to Webster among particular Elizabethans, whose echo one catches so frequently in *The Waste Land*, 'Gerontion', and 'Whispers of Immortality'. There seems to be a kinship of spirit and sensibility between these two poets, both of whom are close to Donne. For Eliot's irregular line has its counterpart in Webster, and a certain austerity of phrase marks both. But Eliot's density of thought and telescoping of images, by reflecting a much more complex world, give a new compound and make him more difficult than Webster. Here again tradition and novelty distinguish Eliot's poetry. This reference to Webster, like the one to Donne in the first part of this essay, ought to suggest the meaning of *tradition* in Eliot's poetic theory.

Since this essay is more suggestive than exhaustive, partly because I do not want to labor my points and partly because indications are perhaps best, I may excuse my failure to consider Eliot's poetry as a source of 'innocent amusement', which it becomes for critics like

Mr. Boyd. What Mr. Boyd calls the orthodox pedantry of *The Sacred Wood* has had sufficient airing in this essay to provoke judgment. Certainly, aesthetic self-contradiction is not a charge that can be laid at the door of T. S. Eliot, for the careful reader will find *The Sacred Wood* in *The Waste Land*.



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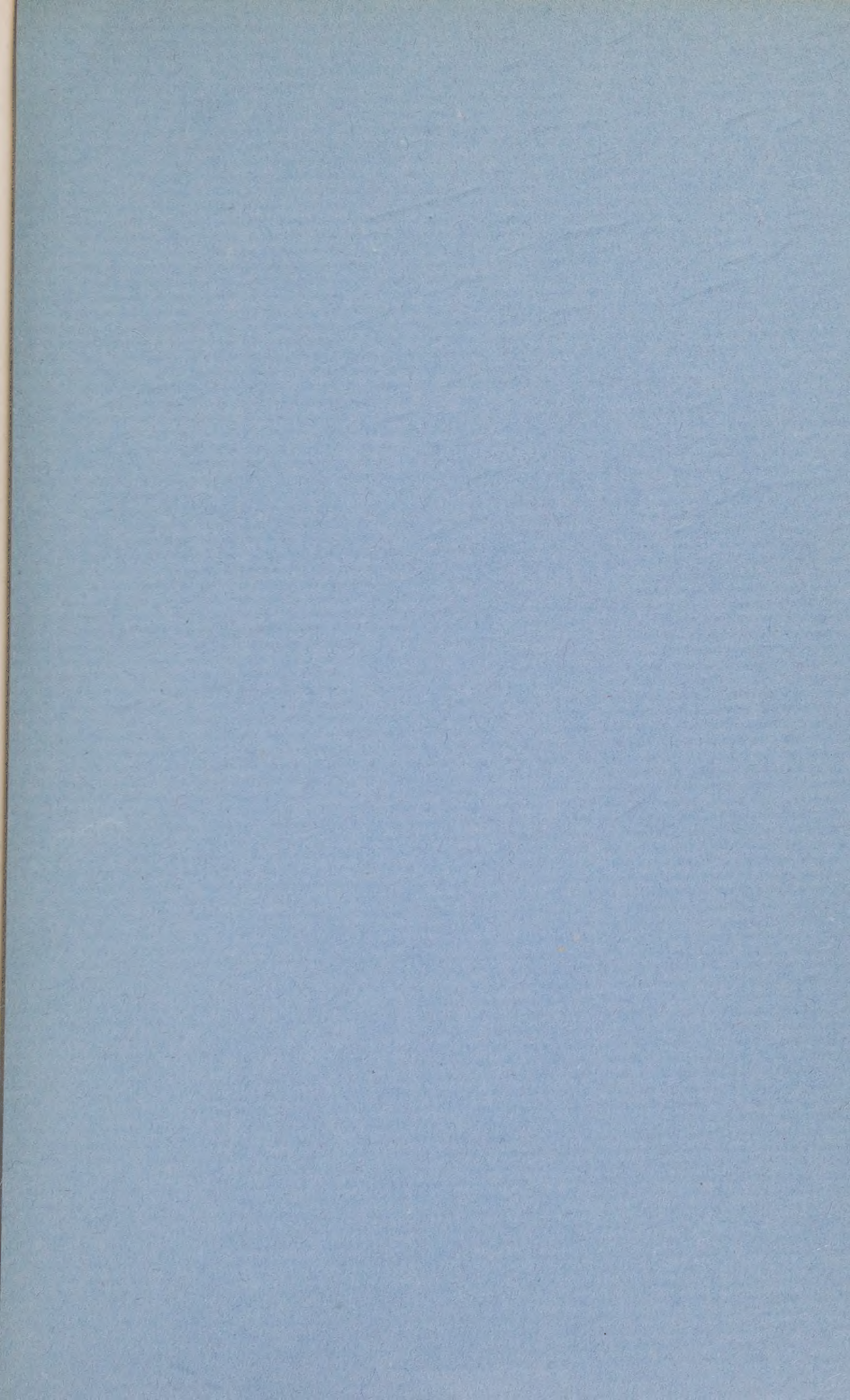
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